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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the factors that either facilitate or inhibit vocabulary learning and suggests practical classroom techniques for beginning and more advanced students. Vocabulary acquisition is related to the learning situation and to the form, meaning, and grammatical role of the new item in the target language. The focus of the teaching should be on the needs of communication and, therefore, on the active skills (speaking and writing) in real life situations. The learner's task of processing the input -- of acquiring a new word -- revolves around three key factors: (1) the phonological shape of the word, (2) its meaning, and (3) its grammatical role in a sentence. Each of these features presents potential problems for the second language student in varying degrees, depending on proficiency. Techniques involved in the solutions to these problems are discussed. Because motivation is a key to learning vocabulary, it is suggested that the teacher discuss with the class words they would like to know or think they should know, so only pertinent items are addressed. Directed vocabulary study must become an integral part of foreign language programs if adequate communicative competence is to be achieved at any proficiency level. (Author/JK)

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Factors Affecting Vocabulary Learning in a Second Language*

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To the uninitiated, using a foreign language consists of one-to-one replacement of lexical items: Unfamiliar words in the target language (TL) are systematically substituted for familiar words in the native language (NL). More advanced students, and of course teachers, know that nothing can be further from the truth, as each language expresses ideas, actions, and relationships in its own unique fashion. While these lexical and organizational divergences between the NL and the TL pose learning problems for students (as well as descriptive difficulties for teachers and linguists!), from the student's point of view, the fundamentals of effective vocabulary acquisition remain constant. They are related to the learning situation and to the form, meaning, and grammatical role of the new item in the TL. This paper briefly discusses the factors which either facilitate or inhibit vocabulary learning, examining first the kind and degree of learning we wish to instill in our students. Practical classroom techniques will be suggested for beginning and more advanced students.

Hadlich provided an excellent behavioral description of the goal of vocabulary study in a foreign language: "A word cannot be said to have been learned until the student can respond with it directly to the needs of communication..." (1965: 427). Closer examination of this statement

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reminds us of the importance of the learning environment and performance expectations as shapers of learning outcomes.

As indicated by the words respond...to the needs of communication, our focus should be on the active skills (speaking and writing) in real life situations. The active skills are more difficult than the passive skills as they demand that students recall and reproduce the linguistic elements they have learned. Passive skills (listening and reading) require only that they recognize the elements provided. Though both are essential for communication, emphasis on the more demanding tasks subsumes a knowledge of, and growth in, the less demanding tasks. Beyond mere manipulation, language is a process in which two or more parties participate for exchange of information. Students pride themselves on getting their ideas across, as well as being able to decode what others are saying. Time spent in conversation (however brief at the beginning levels) and in discussion of issues of personal or social concern to students (at the more advanced levels) bring reality and communication back into the classroom.

Furthermore, Hadlich's use of the word directly points up the necessity of teaching vocabulary with as little recourse as possible to the NL. This issue calls to mind the distinction between coordinate and compound bilingualism, outlined by Ervin and Osgood (1954) and confirmed in surveys of psycholinguistic research by Jakobovits (1970: 165-9) and Taylor (1976: 259-61). Stated simply, the coordinate bilingual is said to have two distinct languages, each equipped with its own semantic system, processing mechanisms, and input/output channels. Coordinate bilingualism is the developmental result of separate interactions with

the real world, as is the case when one language is spoken at home and another outside the home. On the other hand, the compound bilingual has one semantic system and a processing mechanism which must sort and identify information according to the input/output channel appropriate to the language in use at the time. It is the developmental result when a youngster grows up in a home where two languages are used interchangeably. In classroom terms, coordinate bilingualism is the result of the direct method, which encourages students to conceptualize in the second language (L2) alone, avoiding overt or covert reference to the NL. Compound bilingualism comes of learning the L2 through the NL, as is the case with the grammar-translation method. It bears repeating that a student is more likely to use a word directly, without mediation or reference to the NL, if that is how he or she learned it originally.

Once we have clearly in mind that we wish to strive for active, direct, and functional use of the language, we are free to focus on the specifics of the material we wish to teach. Mackey cited five variables for the teacher/textbook writer to keep in mind when selecting vocabulary for classroom presentation. These include frequency, range, availability, coverage, and learnability (1965:176). Similarly, Michel and Patin stressed form, meaning, distribution, and use in their discussion of vocabulary teaching techniques (1972:3-6). Considerations of this nature help determine the linguistic environment or input for the student. From his or her vantage point as learner, however, the task of processing that input, that is, acquiring a new word, revolves around three key factors: 1) the phonological shape of the word, 2) its meaning, and 3) its grammatical role in a sentence. Each of these features presents

potential problems for the L2 student in varying degrees, depending on proficiency. Each will be treated in turn.

The sound of a new word is the first stumbling block for students. In a study of Russian and English word pairs, Rodgers (1967) found that the pronunciation difficulty of the L2 stimulus inhibits recall of the NL response. Examples include sounds that are not in the phonetic inventory of the NL, and, more importantly, consonant clusters which are not permitted in the NL, such as /vzgl/ or /fsy/. In a similar vein, Henning (1973) discovered that acoustic confusion in recall of TL items produced larger amounts of error for low proficiency or beginning students, and conversely, that semantic confusion produced more errors for the more proficient or advanced students in his study.

Henning recommended repetition and aural discrimination exercises as well as songs, spelling and rhyming games, and tongue twisters to help differentiate sounds and familiarize beginning students with the phonological aspects of the TL. For more advanced beginners and intermediate students, the Corrigez-moi exercises suggested by Birckbichler and Omaggio (1978: 339) focuses on sound confusions in a meaningful context. Students must choose the appropriate word from an array supplied, as in the following examples:

> Le matin (je m'habille) (j'habite) dans ma chambre.
> Je porte (des chaussettes) (des chaussures) de laine en hiver.
> Voilà la dame (dont) (donc) j'ai parlé.
> Il a laissé la voiture (devant) (derrière) le garage.

This exercise is most helpful when the distractors are chosen from errors the students have actually committed in their own work. (For phonological exercises directed at the needs of advanced students, see the section on

grammatical role).

In order to attach meaning to the sound, that is, to introduce students to the value of a word, the traditional approach uses lists of TL items, followed by NL glosses. As pointed out earlier, this fosters compound bilingualism and adds an extra step between the real world referent and the word in the TL. Vocabulary control more reminiscent of coordinate bilingualism is possible, given forethought, simple props, and an unthreatening yet disciplined classroom atmosphere. Again, from the students' point of view, three factors signficantly increase the learnability of a new word meaning: personalization, attention to imagery, and real world manipulation.

In the Russian-English study mentioned above, Rodgers found that individualized treatment is the most effective strategy for learning both the sound of the Russian and the English meaning of the (arbitrarily) matched word pairs. The subject modifies the phonological contours of the Russian stimulus to match a known English item, e.g. for the Russian stimulus /krupniy/ 'huge', the subject might construct an English item similar in pronunciation: 'croupe knee, she's got a cold in her knee, she's got a croupe knee'. The subject then relates the newly constructed English mediator to the designated English response, i.e. 'Her housemaid's knee is <u>huge</u>'. This association is then practiced, as in 'Her croupe knee is <u>huge</u>' (Rodgers 1967: 30). Although this strategy is in apparent contradiction with the principles of direct response in a communicative situation, and appears quite cumbersome, selective use of the technique quite probably figures in the learning schemes that some students already employ, either consciously or unconsciously. Atkinson and Raugh (1975)

and Raugh and Atkinson (1975) reported substantial gains for students who regularly use a variation of this mnemonic device, which they dubbed the "keyword method". The apparent success of keywords stems from the attention focused on the problematic item itself and from the student's own use of mental imagery. This technique presents certain advantages, particularly at the beginning level when students are challenged by a large number of undifferentiated and therefore meaningless new words.

Quite in keeping with the notion that the real world itself, with all its stimuli and interactions, is the best reinforcement device for meaning, several studies show improved performance when reality is introduced into vocabulary acquisition. Lado (1967: 57) found word presentation in a context exerted a positive influence on vocabulary expansion, especially when used in conjunction with visual stimuli depicting specific vocabulary items. A more striking approach comes from Asher (1966 and 1974) who presented evidence that both elementary and college age students benefited from acting out commands in Japanese and Russian. Although the test groups had no prior knowledge of the target languages, physical involvement in the acquisition process increased both immediate and delayed retention. The testing consisted of listening only, and control groups were asked to respond to the commands by writing out the English translation. The test groups who responded by acting out the commands were better able to retain long commands such as 'Pick up the paper, book, and pencil, and sit down on the chair' as well as novel utterances that recombined elements from the original set of commands.

For beginning students, the real world can be brought into the classroom through the use of pictures, drawings, objects, and simple physical

responses, including "Simon says" games. Visual and physical activity is no less important to the intermediate and advanced students. At the secondary and college levels, FL classes tend to be rather sedentary, but they do not have to be. The attention span of a 15 to 21 year old is greater than that of a grade school student, and the high schooler may fidget less in his or her desk, but that does not mean he or she would not prefer, indeed might well benefit from, doing something. The obvious outgrowth of physical responses would be simple 10-20 minute field trips which require the class to narrate their actions and relate their observations in the TL. For example, one college teacher who followed this suggestion reports great success in teaching prepositions and case endings in Russian by hiding a dollar bill someplace on campus. Students must find the prize by using a combination of "Twenty questions" and narrated search parties. The one who finds the bill gets to keep it.

Thus far word meaning has been considered in terms of presenting and reinforcing isolated, concrete or readily demonstrable words. But words are not normally learned in isolation. Indeed, if they were the results would be an awkward jumble. The mind strives for organization, yet reaches out for parallels and opposites. Once known, the meaning of any given lexical item conjures up a host of related terms: synonyms, antonyms, class names, and names of other members of the class to which the word belongs. Here again focused attention is essential for semantic categorizing. Birckbichler and Omaggio (1978: 339 and 341) suggest a host of traditional analytic tasks such as vocabulary card sorting and creating lists of words relating to a given category (appropriate for beginning students), as well as lexical searches in a written passage and semantic matching

(for more proficient students). These techniques are equally effective with abstract nouns, verbs, and adjectives as well, since the sorting/categorizing tasks require students to create semantic criteria for classification. A list of 10-15 adjectives, such as attentive, critical, forgetful, generous, organized, stingy, snobby, humorous, noisy and timid, can easily be prepared and distributed. Students can then sort the adjectives according to whether they indicate a positive or a negative description of people in general. Such a list might also be used to elicit descriptions of characters in a reading passage, or even self-evaluations. An analogous list of positive and negative abstract nouns might look like this: love, greed, pride, strength, dishonesty, poise, intelligence, creativity, carelessness, and prejudice. Along the same lines, a list of verbs, all of which take a person as a direct object, might include: encourage, tease, scold, assist, cheat, entertain, boast forgive, ignore, and console. Questions such as "Would you like someone to _____ you?" or "Have you ever _____ed your brother/sister?" provide the personalization necessary for acquisition of the vocabulary items.

For students, the last aspect of a word that needs definition is the grammatical role, or part of speech. It is the key to using new words in sentences, and all words are not of equal importance in students' minds. Rodgers (1967) found that nouns and verbs are the easiest to remember on randomly paired lists of TL and NL words. In actual language use, students react differently to the various form classes: An error analysis of compositions and translations by second-, fourth-, and sixth-semester students of French showed that adjectives and adverbs and/or prepositions

were the most difficult items for students to recall and reproduce appropriately (Ludwig 1977). Several factors work in conjunction to influence the variability in acquisition of new items in the principal grammatical categories. Students control not only the amount but also the kind of data they are willing to learn. The pedagogical environment contributes a great deal to determining the kind of input the students have to choose from. The emphasis on verb and noun morphology --irregular conjugations, tense formation, gender, and where appropriate, declensions-- makes students more aware of verbs and nouns, and exposes them more frequently to lexical items in these two categories. Adjectives and adverbs receive much less attention in grammar texts. Also, an item is less likely to be acquired if it is not absolutely essential to the construction of a sentence. Nouns and verbs makes sentences; adjectives and adverbs merely embellish. Thus, principles of economy of effort influence the acquisition of individual items from among the array presented to the student. In addition, many teachers have suggested that the lack of complex or shaded descriptive expressions reflects lexical poverty in the students' NL, brought about by television and unrelieved by recent educational trends. Regardless of the reasons that hamper acquisition of adjectives and adverbs, our efforts should be redoubled in order to bring students beyond the primary and overused dichotomies of happy/sad, good/bad, and fast/slow.

Recommended solutions to the problem involve techniques already mentioned. For beginners, use of physical responses is particularly appropriate for prepositions and adverbs. As for adjectives, pictures showing colors, qualities, and emotions can be used to illustrate and

elicit more precise descriptive terms. For advanced students, assignments requiring a written paragraph describing a situation that produces an emotional state, such as surprised, silly, jealous, resigned, or a quality such as generous, amusing, shy, calculating, could enrich students' skills in manipulating a wider variety of abstract adjectives. Students might read or distribute their work to classmates and have them guess the adjective in question. Descriptions of famous people or classmates as well as local or national landmarks would help develop a richer vocabulary for expressing the features of the world around them.

The traditional teaching device of introducing word roots and their morphological variations is as applicable to developing phonological and grammatical sensitivity as it is to vocabulary expansion at the meaning level. Word families very often spread over several grammatical categories, allowing a wider range of adjectives to be presented and related to nouns and verbs which students already know. The following list gives some examples:

Verb	Noun	Adjective
allumer	allumette lumière	lumineux/se
chauffer	chauffage chaleur	chaud/e
éclairer	clarté	clair/e
lire	lecture lecteur/trice	lisible
ralentir	lenteur	lent/e
savoir	sagesse	sage
vieillir	vieillard/e	vieux/vieille

Moreover, this technique highlights the suffixes which mark the grammatical category of the word. Rivers stressed the importance of both prefixes and suffixes in the context of developing reading skills, since both alter and reinforce word meaning (1975: 174 and 226-7). These aids to

word formation should not be overlooked in developing productive skills as well.

Providing students with a large store of readily accessible vocabulary items is never an easy task. The rigors may be eased somewhat if the teacher is attuned to how students learn as well as what they learn best. Carroll listed five guidelines for presentation and reinforcement of linguistic items:

1. The frequency with which an item is practiced per se is not so crucial as the frequency with which it is contrasted with other items with which it may be confused.
2. The more meaningful the material to be learned, the greater the facility in learning and retention.
3. Other things being equal, materials presented visually are more easily learned than comparable material presented orally.
4. In learning a skill, it is often the case that conscious attention to its critical features and understanding of them will facilitate learning.
5. The more numerous kinds of associations that are made to an item, the better are learning and retention. (1966: 104-5)

The choice of what to teach will depend on the goals for the course and lesson, be these goals cultural appreciation, self expression, or both. Richards (1970) stressed the importance of vocabulary selection based on attention to frequency, and more importantly, usefulness and familiarity of the TL items when used by native speakers. When terms of everyday functional value are given precedence over specialized literary terms, the material immediately becomes more meaningful. "Wherever it is possible to predict the uses a language may have for the learner', Wilkens suggested, 'it should be possible to limit the language taught to that which has the highest practical return for him' (1972: 114). A discussion with the class about the words they would like to know, or think they should know, can help weed out extraneous items and ensure that students

will be sufficiently motivated to learn the words they feel important for their own conversations and writing. It also helps the teacher to identify areas he or she might otherwise overlook in course and lesson planning.

We are one step closer to giving the same degree of attention to vocabulary that syntax currently enjoys when we realize that vocabulary acquisition is neither a random nor a necessarily boring process. Directed vocabulary study must become an integral part of our foreign language programs if adequate communicative competence is to be achieved at any proficiency level. As Wilkens (1972: 111) pointed out, 'The fact is, that without grammar, very little can be conveyed, without vocabulary, nothing can be conveyed.'

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